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Doing time – Visual notes on waiting without quite knowing for what exactly

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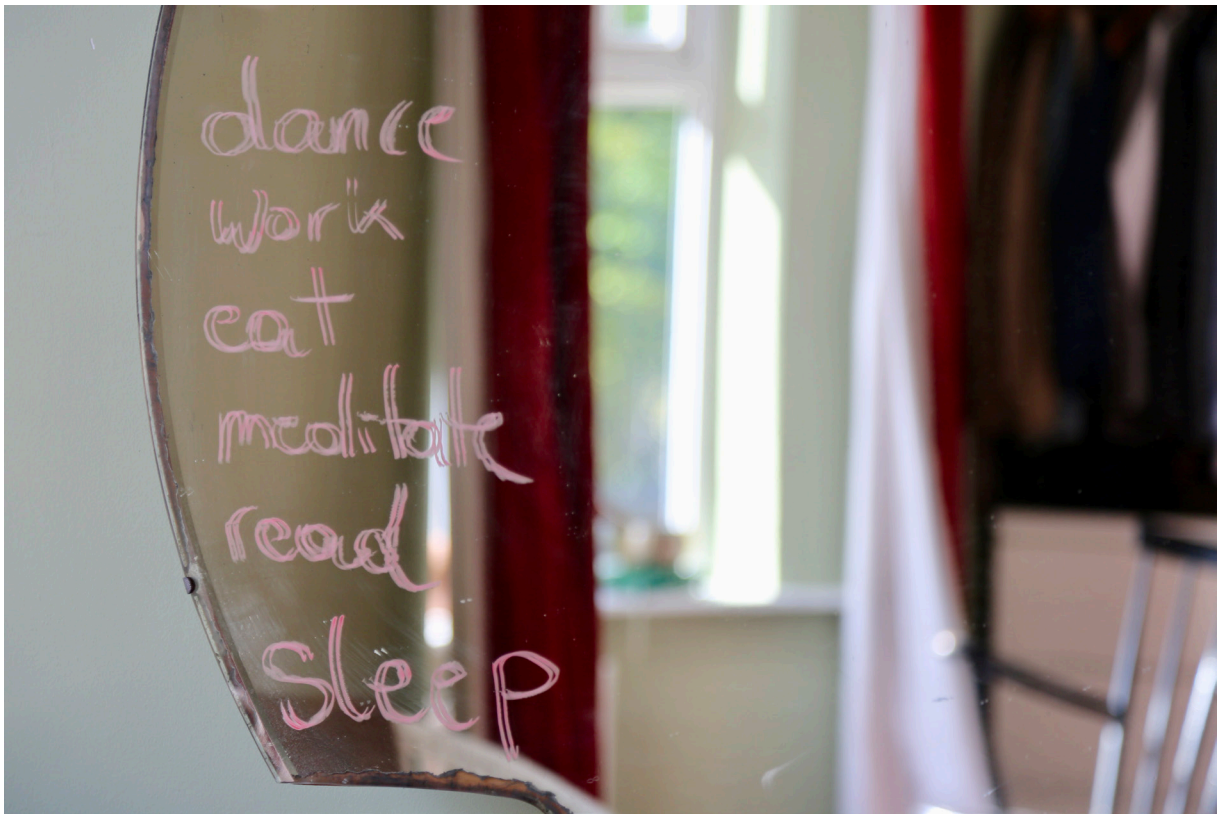

Figure 1/ *Tactics* or activities written in a mirror.

Figure 2. *Joyful neglect* or painted toenails in ripped sock

Figure 3. *Metaphors* or drops of water caught in net.

Figure 4. *Fading colours,* or a picture of my hairline.

Figure 5. *Rethinking the mundane* or nails arranged in star shape next to nail clipper.

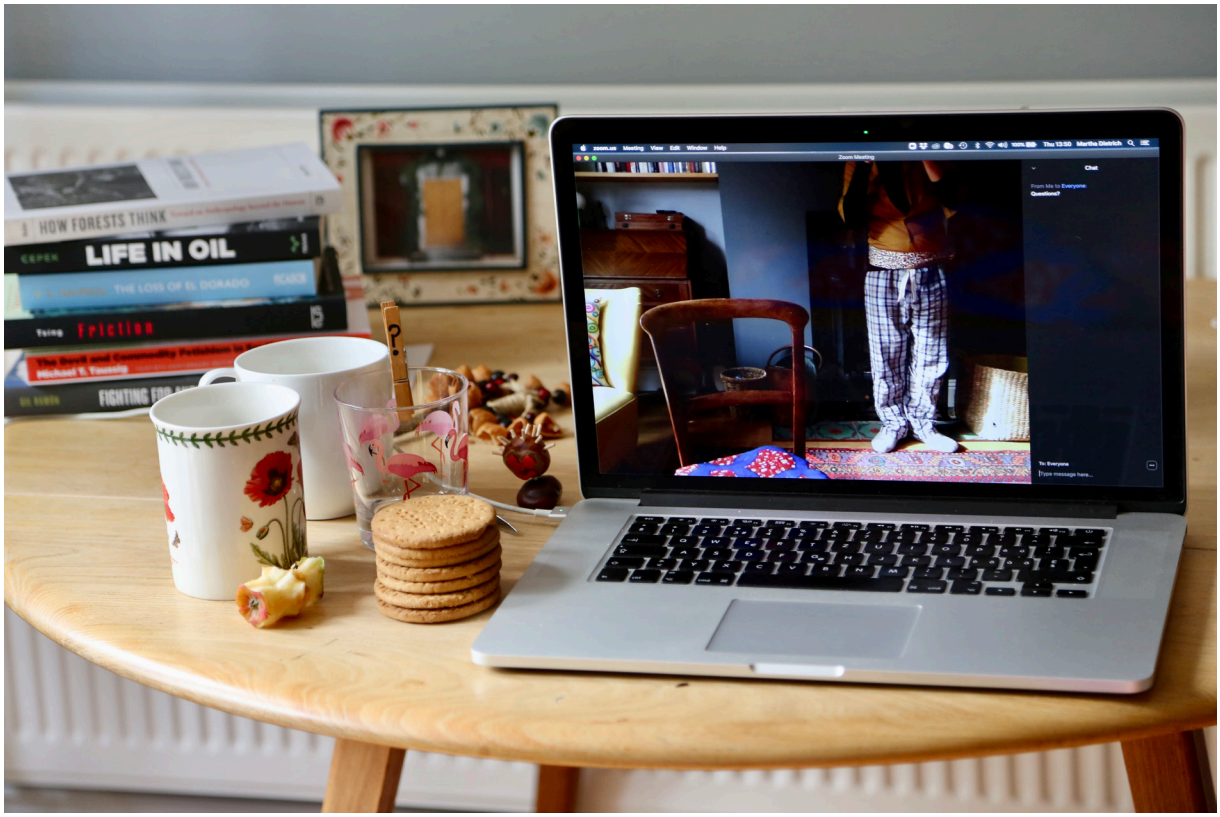

Figure 6. *Framed* or my work desk.

Figure 7. *A sea of bed* or bed sheets in the morning.

Figure 8. *Going around in circles* or my daughter's music box.

Figure 9. *Attachments* or ivy on my garden fence.

Figure 10. *House of fairies* or toy house.

It has now been eight months since Covid-19 effectively entered our lives. From that time, I have been at home where, according to current government advice, my body must remain for the unforeseeable future to "break the circle", "protect the NHS[1]" and "save the lives of others in my community". Eight months of homeschooling, online teaching and virtual reunions with family and friends. My experience of lockdown has been engulfed by an ever-present feeling of disjuncture, which is familiar in its elements but unfamiliar in its intensity. This feeling bears resemblance with what long-term prisoners with whom I worked over the past ten years described as "doing time": doing the things one needs to do to maintain a sense of normality while waiting without quite knowing for what exactly (Dietrich 2019a, 2019b). Similarly, Covid-19 has thrown many of us into an imaginary waiting room in anticipation for a vaccine, tighter restrictions, sensible politics, or perhaps a miracle? My research partners used to describe their experience of imprisonment as a combination of yearning for the distant end of their sentence like a faltering finishing line, while keeping themselves occupied with a daily routine. Questions like 'what will my world look like once I am done waiting?', pierced their everyday. A world in pieces, business as usual, or a new beginning?

The notion of 'time out' and life passing is latent as much as it is ephemeral, materialising in a coinciding and yet contradictory mind-set of hectic boredom (Braman 2004; Comfort 2008). When inmates see their loved ones on visiting days, when they make their routine phone calls, or receive news from 'outside', they are reminded that the world beyond the prison wall spins at a different pace. Time while 'doing time' does not pass equally (Kruttschnitt 2005). In a Covid-19 lockdown, which offers no anticipatable end, this feeling of disjuncture is intensified by social media, the evening news and a new virtual sociality that creates a sense of acceleration (and distraction) precisely when life seems to grind to a halt. In an era in which the "protection of slowness" (Eriksen 2001: 156) has become a political stance, the pandemic has violently hit the break button revealing, among other things, a lack of strategies in dealing with silence, isolation and time.

I have always been aware of the experiential disparities between my research partners and myself. Some have spent more than two decades behind bars, while I entered and exited prison on the same day during limited fieldwork periods. Prison gave form to my work, not my life. Only recently I talked to Maritza, one of my former research partners in Lima, who left prison after twenty-five years to find herself in lockdown only two years after her release. She told me that lockdown was relatively easy, almost a luxurious version of what she knew from prison. "At home at least", she confided "you are the master over your own routine". This, I thought, is exactly what people in lockdown struggle with. When all structure is reconfigured into one space, the challenge is to be/stay a master of your routine. The attention shifts to the small and unremarkable of one's life, but only the thought of that is unbearable to many.

In theories of ethnographic practice this deep engagement with other people's everyday lives through 'spending time' in the field, is considered the labour of fieldwork. When time slows, "a clearer window opens into ordinary life" (Martinez 2019: 541) The performance of inactivity and stillness turns experimental and productive (Estalella and Sanchez Criado 2018), but with the difference of choice. A body that chooses to consciously wait, observe, reflect, relate to others and feel in the field (Martínez 2019),

activates the body and mind differently than the body that is forced to slow down by its circumstances.

And yet there may be productivity in forced (self-) observation, if the choice is to take it as a challenge. Perhaps this is the most precious lesson learned from women like Maritza, Lucero and Mili, long-term inmates at the Maximum-security penitentiary of Santa Monica de Chorrillos, who survived torture and isolation, followed by long years of harsh prison regimes. In the mindset of taking up the challenge of approaching my own lockdown experience through an ethno-/photo-graphic lens, I sought to explore bodily articulations and visual impressions of a sensory world as experienced by a body and mind in lockdown. Capturing the mundane and observing the body be inscribed by the time and space imposed by lockdown may tell us something about the world according to Covid-19, but more importantly how we choose to relate to it.

Notes

1 National Health Service

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